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A Rationale for Needs-Based Fairness: Impact in an Inclusive Classroom

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Abstract: Emerging from classroom-based action research, this reflective research paper articulates a rationale for needs-based fairness curriculum detailing instructional techniques that increase positive attitude formation towards fairness, self-concept and motivation. A description of this needs-based fairness curriculum is intertwined with qualitative data to highlight the development of self-concept, attitude formation, and shifts within an inclusive classroom culture. This paper calls for a needs-based fairness curriculum and language, which increases acceptance in classroom communities, enactment of solidarity, and respect for the dignity of all people.

Keywords: Inclusion, Disabilities, Curriculum, Classroom-based Research, Fairness

Each morning, James, a 1st-grade student, finds his peers sitting at their desks, quietly unpacking their things. At his desk, James is met by the "boilerplate" worksheet called "morning work." Daily each student completes the same work, wears the same uniform, and sits in desks which are all... the same. Already uneasy about yet another day of pretending to understand the teacher, James uses all his energy to sit still to avoid drawing attention to himself. If luck prevails, his teacher will offer him the wobbly stool or seat cushion in the corner of the room but using these tools aren't often worth the glares of jealousy from his peers. James learns differently; yet he must negotiate difference by expending critical cognitive energy to fit in and be like peers, lowering his self-concept and motivation for tasks requiring effortful critical thinking.

James's classroom instruction is grounded in an equality fairness framework that does not promote explicit growth in students' attitudes towards differences. Too often, students are pushed to the margins of a classroom, labeled as "the other," the one which we cannot or will not understand or explicitly support. Thus, the limited scaffolds create an exclusionary environment lowering students' self-concepts [1]. Students deserve a needs-based fairness curriculum to ensure success for typically developing students and students with disabilities; yet, research around curricula that foster inclusive environments is scarce [11].

The following discussion offers instructional techniques that increase positive attitude formation within a needs-based fairness framework by addressing students' perceptions of fairness. First, we explain the importance of considering needs-based fairness, self-concept and motivation within interventions that hope to influence student attitudes. Then, grounded in these theories, we provide a template for a needs-based fairness curriculum that employs best instructional practices, fosters acceptance in classroom communities, enacts solidarity, and respects the dignity of all people. Emerging from classroom-based action research, we explore qualitative data from the curriculum's implementation in a Catholic school setting, whose mission is grounded in the teachings of the Catholic church. For our purposes, it is important to note the teacher's commitment to respecting the dignity of each person and being in solidarity with marginalized people; both of these values are not restrictive to religious settings, but rather essential elements of teaching. Resulting trends show that the curriculum increased student's self-concept and positive attitude formation. Our study sought to address the following research question: To what degree, if any, does implementing a needs-based fairness curriculum promote positive self-concept while motivating students to support peers who are different from themselves?

Theoretical Framework

Fostering Positive Student Attitudes

In an inclusive classroom, characterized by mutual respect and educational equity for all students [10], there is reciprocity and benefit for typically developing students and students with disabilities. Attitudes of typically developing students and those with learning disabilities can pose a significant problem in inclusive classrooms. Based on a participant sample of one-hundred, age 4-10-year-old children, Nowicki [13] observed that students more willingly engaged with students with physical disabilities than intellectual disabilities, attributed to the visual nature of the disability. However, Campell et al. (2004) found that knowing specific information

about a disability resulted in more positive behavior towards others. Thus, we must prioritize increasing students' awareness and knowledge of disabilities when developing interventions that support attitude formation and inclusive participation.

Within these interventions students must feel loved and accepted by their peers, while developing their attitudes towards differences. For students with disabilities, acceptance is influenced by their typically developing peers' perceptions and attitudes about disabilities [2]; thus, students' perceptions and attitudes impact how students with disabilities feel and participate in the classroom community. Educators genuinely committed to protecting and promoting the dignity of each child must provide opportunities that expand typically developing students' perceptions of peers with disabilities through collaborative opportunities and teacher modeling of positive attitudes toward students with disabilities [11]. Positive attitudes towards disabilities and differences create classroom environments conducive to all students' learning [16] - [13] and must be the rule rather than the exception.

Yu and Ostrosky [16] identify three domains - *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioral* - shaping children's attitude formation and perception of disabilities. The *cognitive* domain refers to a child's understanding that disabilities exist and the implications of that understanding. Cognitive recognition of physical disabilities often appears as early as preschool, while knowledge of intellectual disabilities typically emerges in kindergarten. The *affective* domain is the "emotional reactions that occur in response to peers with disabilities" (16, p. 2). Emotional reactions from typically developing peers about disabilities vary from indifference to fear to love and inform the behavioral attitudes. Lastly, the *behavioral* domain refers to actions that are grounded in emotional responses. Students' actions towards peers with disabilities reflect how they think about disabilities and how they feel about peers with disabilities. Thus, the school environment critically impacts the formation of a child's attitude towards students with disabilities.

Influenced by numerous external factors, children's attitudes about peers with disabilities are complex and multifaceted [13]. Teacher awareness of these factors can lead to proactive instructional practices that ensure positive attitude formation and a welcoming community. Diamond [8] emphasizes that early intervention from classroom teachers dramatically impacts typically developing students' perceptions of classmates with disabilities. Fostering positive attitudes and holistic acceptance allows students to gain a deeper understanding of their peer's differences.

Teachers protect and respect the human dignity of all persons through authentic modeling of supportive and positive interactions. Regarding all students as worthy of acceptance and love, the teacher sets a powerful example, which typically developing students observe and eventually emulate, thus impacting perceptions, attitudes, the classroom environment, and ways of being and acting [8]. To preserve human dignity and full community participation, students must interact with, empathize with, and form positive attitudes towards those with disabilities.

Inclusion and Needs-Based Fairness

Understanding "fairness" is essential to positive attitude formation. There are three types of fairness: equality, equity, and needs-based [15]. Equality fairness provides everyone the same support. Equity fairness is proportionate to input; the hardest working students receive the most support. Rather than having students perceive fairness as equal or proportionate, needs-based fairness states that everyone gets the support he/she needs and assumes that all students are striving to realize the same objectives. This type of fairness is seen in inclusive classrooms, where students receive modifications or accommodations in order to better access learning [2]. Although equality fairness may be viewed as important when addressing racial justice, this dangerously asserts that all members of a group require the same support to achieve the same end result and ignores the uniqueness and funds of knowledge each person brings to the community. As such, equality and equity are essential types of fairness in societal contexts, while in the classroom, fairness must be needs-based to assure each child's access to academic, social, and emotional learning.

Needs-based fairness treats the whole child as unique, valuing the dignity of each life, giving each child what he/she needs to flourish. Rather than promote the exclusion of others, it supports the highest inclusion of each individual, leading to greater participation in community and society writ large [3]. Each individual life is valued while students access rich learning opportunities oriented towards inclusivity. This curriculum provides a way of thinking and acting for *all* students, not only those who have needs outside society's definition of norm.

Self-Concept and Motivation

Educators must be mindful of a student's perceived self-concept as it directly impacts motivation to participate in the classroom, and thus interventions to promote student's positive attitudes towards needs-based fairness. Self-concept is defined as students' "cognitions and feelings about themselves" [17, p. 34] and strongly predicts student intrinsic motivation. Regardless of ability, students with positive self-concept showed higher

levels of intrinsic motivation [17]. This strongly suggests that students with high levels of intrinsic motivation and positive self-concepts see themselves as valuable to the class community and will participate in group discussions. Participation in group discussions influences teacher perceptions of student academic success, motivation, and self-concept [5]. Collaborative classroom strategies, for students with and without disabilities, are the most prominent positive predictor of student intrinsic motivation as “high levels of frequency of participation in class discussions led to higher levels of academic success and higher levels of intrinsic motivation, as perceived by the teacher” [5, p.107-108]. Positive self-concept leads to higher levels of class participation, which affects perceived motivation. Without these catalysts, students may not experience “effortful thinking” known as critical-analytic thinking, in which students “use credible evidence to evaluate and assess what it is they are thinking and learning” [11, p. 520]. Students are motivated to engage in this deep thinking only when they feel confident to do so.

Miele and Wigfield [12] outline four task characteristics that encourage motivation: interest value, attainment value, utility value, and cost. Interest and utility values suggest that a task is enjoyable and useful, while cost is a judgment of the positive or negative implications of engaging in the task. Attainment value suggests that the cognitive task relates to a student’s sense of self, again emphasizing the impact of self-concept on student motivation and engagement in critical-analytic thinking [17]. Needs-based fairness curriculum addresses students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes through tasks that hold a high attainment value to increase motivation and consequently critical analysis. Thus, needs-based fairness should be explicitly taught through evidence-based practices that offer ample opportunities for rich peer discussions [15].

Rationale for a Needs-Based Fairness Curriculum

Study’s Background

Teachers have a responsibility to differentiate instruction and provide accommodations based on need, while fulfilling their overt obligation to address students’ attitude formation. The following curriculum emerged from classroom-based, action research designed to identify the relationship between a needs-based fairness curriculum and students’ cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes about disabilities, with the goal of fostering positive self-concept of students different from themselves. During implementation, data sources were collected showing this curriculum effectiveness in regards to aforementioned concepts.

More specifically, the curriculum was implemented in a first-grade classroom in an urban Catholic school. The teacher (second author) was a member of the Urban Catholic Teacher Corps: a program that places licensed teachers in urban Catholic schools and mentors them to promote Catholic Social Teachings [9]. The class was composed of fifteen students: 73.1% Black or African American, 14.3 % White, 8% two or more races, and 4.6% Asian. There were 9 boys and 5 girls, ranging from 5 - 7 years. 11 students received free and reduced lunch. Two students had Individual Education Plans. Parental consent to participate in this study was acquired.

To understand the curricular impact, we collected exit tickets, transcribed audio-taped lessons, student work samples, teacher observation field notes, and the first author’s notes documenting an initial and final interview with the teacher. Exit Tickets measured students’ understanding of the major concept of each lesson. Each lesson was audio-recorded and transcribed so that the second author could provide an unbiased perspective to the teacher’s observation field notes. Teacher observation field notes documented students’ responses to the curriculum and students’ use of strategies or language of the curriculum. Field notes provided foci for discussion, questions, etc. during the final teacher interview. The researcher also recorded field notes of these check-in meetings.

Curriculum Description and Impact

Developed by the authors, this needs-based fairness curriculum focused on research-based, best practices for increasing self-concept, motivation, and critical analysis in the context of teaching about fairness. Scripted lessons occurred twice a week, over 4 weeks. Instruction targeted understanding and awareness of disabilities to develop empathy and curiosity [16] and fostered positive attitudes using shared common language, a critical element [3] - [15]. Fairness was defined as “getting the tools you need”; an unfair situation was defined as a “struggle”; a tool was defined as “something that helps you achieve success similar to your peers.”

Preparatory conversations on disability encouraged students to see differences as positive and integral to the uniqueness of all people. Literature framed reflections around students’ emotional responses and reinforced the language of the curriculum. Students discussed the tools that were available to them when processing emotions to increase attainment value for students, and thus promote student’s self-concept, positioning them to think about the tools they use to navigate their own struggles. Discussions prepared students to engage with literature about specific disabilities, equipping students with the language to analyze critically the reason that people need different tools and to process their emotions when those tools differ from their own.

Developing cognitive attitudes. An essential, first-step in developing a needs-based fairness curriculum is to ground and develop cognitive attitudes. Using intentional, asset-based literature is foundational. To contextualize this cognitive learning within a disability, we selected *Six dots: A story of young Louis Braille* [4] an exemplary, biographical children's book that follows Louis's journey from becoming blind to eventually inventing Braille. Textual events were categorized into struggles, tools, and evaluations of fairness, increasing the utility value, as vocabulary/language is crucial to understanding and discussing fairness. After listening to the text, students were guided to address their own positioning around perceived struggles, tools, and fairness. Facilitated reflection on initial and final reactions to *Six Dots* grounded students' critical awareness of fairness requiring tools, such as Braille. Thus, these conversations around a specific disability encouraged students to recognize personal/societal assumptions and be open-minded about others. Students related this learning to their classroom context while showing positive self-concept, despite having different tools, as seen by this students' comment: "It's okay that (he) has a band on his chair because he has struggles that I don't have and I don't need that tool."

Developing affective attitudes. The affective component of attitude formation is grounded in students' emotional reactions when faced with disabilities [16]. Dialogue impacts thinking, which in turn impacts assumptions [7] and reactions. So, as a result of their dialogue around fairness and perceived blindness struggles, students had a foundation for positive reactions to Braille, a tool used by those who are blind. Through a Braille simulation, the experiential nature of this activity aimed to decrease negative reactions towards differences [6]. During the simulation, the teacher emphasized the dignity of each person, using language and texts that share the experience in a positive, asset-based way [6]. The simulations also added an interest value for students which mediates critical thinking and reflection through dialogue, and eventual application of learning [12]. Guided simulations foster cognitive understanding, affective reactions, and behavioral change, leading to more advanced cognitive understanding and foundation for affective and behavioral attitude formation. Students later extended their learning about disabilities through a Braille library.

This experiential process positioned students to be ready to develop positive, affective attitude formation. When reflecting on this experience, their teacher noted that "students were significantly more supportive of one another and perceptive of others' struggles... The language was key. With first graders, they really clung to 'struggle' and 'tool.' I also think it's important to note that prior to the curriculum I heard a lot of students using the phrase 'that's not fair,' and after the (affective and cognitive lessons), the usage of fair decreased significantly. Students would turn to the language of struggle and tools and leave out fairness all together, actually." She is referencing the impact that the language had on students' ability to analyze the simulation, and their classroom contexts, especially in regards to differences, without demoting their self-concept.

Developing Positive Behavior Attitudes. Deliberate development of cognitive and affective attitudes encourages students to process emotions around fairness less defensively, and thus be more open to behavioral change. When addressing behavioral attitudes, teachers must examine the resentments students can develop when fairness is not explicitly discussed in the classroom [15]. Students who participated in the fairness curriculum were able to process perceived unfairness and needs-based fairness through a "fair jar." Students submit situations in which they've experienced an issue of fairness; they anonymously identify their struggle and (if applicable) the tool they used to mollify the situation. Students then discuss the entry as a class. Kessler notes that the practice of confidential sharing of questions without immediate reactions from others supports students' social, emotional, and spiritual development [14]. They work together to identify the struggle and why fairness is an issue, and brainstorm tools to ensure the appropriate needs-based fairness mindset in the future. Student entries ranged from "I think its not fair because the musike teacher dosn't call on me, " which resulted in suggestions to use popsicle sticks to call on students, to "I think its unfair that my sister has mor help." For the latter concern, students gave prompting questions to determine if it was fair, such as does this student have different struggles than their sister, and if so, do they have the tools that they need. All of these conversations were explicitly confidential with a clear purpose for collaborative discussion [15] - [3]. The teacher is meant to be the facilitator of discussion that encourages freedom of thought [6] so dialogue can become a fruitful tool that leads to deeper reflection and understanding. The goal of the "fair jar" is to address challenging experiences in a productive way that breaks down actionable steps and encourages behavioral changes. Each conversation must be inclusive of all students and foster the negotiation of ideas together [3].

Processes in this curriculum can be extended to address other dilemmas of equity and justice, as it communicates the value of difficult conversations, vulnerability, and self-reflection integral to the cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitude formation. Routine and purposeful use of tools, strategies and discussion norms strengthens positive attitude formation that expands student's self-concepts and encourages critical analysis. The culminating goal is to ensure that students are continually motivated in the classroom, regardless of their, or their peers', tools.

Discussion

Prior to the curriculum, teachers' description of their classrooms aligned with the opening vignette. Yet, throughout the curriculum, students internalized the needs-based fairness language. After the first week, one student demonstrated empathy for his peer, and increased analysis of the classroom's available tools when they stated: "(He) is really struggling. Can I get him the putty from the cool down corner?" In this statement, the student not only notices a peer's struggle but also helps identify a tool for him, without any gain for himself. After experiencing the affective lessons, students continued to show positive self-concept, despite having different tools, when another student stated: "It's okay that (he) has a band on his chair because he has struggles that I don't have and I don't need that tool." This student was demonstrating a positive affective attitude towards the visible difference with her peer. When reflecting during the post check-in, the teacher noted that "students were significantly more supportive of one another and perceptive of others struggles... Language was key. With first graders, they really clung to 'struggle' and 'tool.' I also think it's important to note that prior to the curriculum I heard a lot of students using the phrase 'that's not fair,' and after the curriculum the usage of fair decreased significantly. Students would turn to the language of struggle and tools and leave out unfairness all together, actually." She is referencing the impact that the language had on students' ability to analyze their situations, especially in regards to differences, without demoting their self-concept. The curriculum fostered critical thinking that fostered needs-based fairness valuing the dignity of all peers, which in turn, can translate to appreciating all persons within and outside the classroom. In this way, classrooms enact inclusive practices.

Classrooms would invariably look different if each student participated in a needs-based fairness curriculum increasing the utility of "tool" and "struggle" while developing strategies to identify and increase fairness. Students, such as James and his peers would become living embodiments of inclusivity. Classrooms would be tailored to the students within them, and each student would have access to the tools each needs. Students would become more empathetic to a struggling classmate, offering to be their tool or accompany them through their struggle. That is genuine solidarity. That is what a classroom should look like.

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